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Anna Rebhan

Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier

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Interview Date: March 15, 1980

Interviewer: E.G. - Ernest Grundy

Interviewee: A.R. - Anna Rebhan

E.G.: And I'm in Ravenna, Nebraska today, which is March the 15th, I think, for the purpose of interviewing Mrs. Anna Rebhan...Rebhan.

A.R.: That's right.

E.G.: Mrs. Anna – Ms. Anna Rebhan. This is the part of an 8 state project sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. It is called the Country School Legacy. What we will do with this tape is to place it in a depository probably at Kearney State College for the use of future students who might wish to do research on the country school. I'd like to begin, then, by asking Ms. Rebhan... That's R-E-B-A-H-N?

A.R.: R-E-B-H-A-N.

E.G.: Sorry.

A.R.: It's alright.

E.G.: Ms. Rebhan to tell me something about herself.

A.R.: Well, I am now a retired teacher. [moving mic] I began teaching in 1920. I taught at Will Creek School, 6 miles South of Loup City my first year. That was a new building that burned three days before school was to begin, so we taught in a church that year, which was in the community.

E.G.: What kind of church was it? What denomination?

A.R.: It was just a community church, as I remember. They – all about there came – attended their - their services on Sunday. And then the next 3 years I was employed at district 48, known as the Dry Creek School. That's just about 12 miles South of Loup City. And then the other years that I taught in rural schools were at Newburg School 1 mile North of Sweet Water where I was employed for 9 years.

E.G.: You mind telling me where Sweet Water is?

A.R.: Sweet Water is West of Ravenna 7 miles. And there I had grades 7, 8, 9, and 10.

E.G.: You taught the high school courses, too, then.

A.R.: Yes, I had the high school courses. The school was not ever large, it was just a fine school to work in and it could give good individual help.

E.G.: Was that the end of your Rural School teaching experience?

A.R.: Yes, it was. I did get my degree, then, and I didn't teach just in small, rural towns, I taught at Hazard about 1 year. Then I taught at Lyman, Nebraska 3 years.

E.G.: Now, where is Lyman? That's not close here, is it? [3:00]

A.R.: No, Lyman is in Western Nebraska. And then I was at Dalton 3 years. Dalton, Nebraska, that is also in Western Nebraska near Sidney. And that is the extent of my public school teaching.

E.G.: Did you teach in Ravenna? [unclear]

A.R.: No, I did substitute work in Ravenna.

E.G.: Were you born in this area?

A.R.: I was born, yes, near Richfield...

E.G.: And your name is German?

A.R.: [chuckles] My name is German, yes.

E.G.: Your parents were German?

A.R.: Yes...

E.G.: Were they immigrants?

A.R.: Yes. My mother came from Ausliserine, and my father came from Austria. [3:50]

E.G.: They apparently did not meet in Europe.

A.R.: No...

E.G.: They met here.

A.R.: They met in this country, they were married here. My mother came over when she was just 4, my father was only 3.

E.G.: Did your parents...of course they spoke German.

A.R.: Yes. I didn't know English language until I started to school. I was 6 years old.

E.G.: Well, tell me, how – how did you feel as a 6 year old person, speaker of German, going to a school, presumably, where English was being spoken?

A.R.: Well, I believe that I could understand some of it, but at home my father and mother always spoke English to each other, but they spoke German to us so that we could communicate with our grandparents, because they lived in locality. So that's why we had to learn to speak the – we just learned one language, and that was German, so that we could communicate with them.

E.G.: Was there any problem when you went to school, then? [4:45]

A.R.: No, I can't remember any problem, I only remember that my mother would say that when we went to - after we went to school, we wouldn't talk the German anymore, we were talking English right away.

E.G.: Did your parents look upon your learning English as a means for you to work your way up in the world – in this American world? [5:09]

A.R.: Well, I would – I would think so, that was the language that was spoken in our community, we all – all the other people, although they were German, they spoke English, the adults did. And, so, we just

accepted that and talked it all the time. And, I don't speak German – I understand it, not all of it, but most of it – but I don't attempt to talk it anymore.

E.G.: Well if you don't mind my saying so, I – I get no trace of a German accent from you.

A.R.: No.

E.G.: How do you attribute your learning of Standard English, then? Standard English pronunciation.

A.R.: Well, I don't – I think it was through imitation to our teachers and we did have good, thorough teachers at that time, they were very – they were true teachers. And although our school was large, we had large enrollments, always in the 30s or 40s for a one room school, but one teacher to handle it and that was a big handful.

E.G.: Were they pretty exact as to your pronunciation? Spelling? Your use of the language?

A.R.: I don't remember that – that there was any particular, I think it just sort of had to come natural, we just took it as it came and just accepted it that way and they imitated the others in their language.

E.G.: To get back to your education, did you take the normal training course in high school? [6:37]

A.R.: Yes, I did.

E.G.: You taught on a normal training certificate, then?

A.R.: I did, for the first year, and then I began to go to summer school, a number of summers, beginning in 1924 I went almost continually until I got my degree. And I went to 1 year in order to get my degree at Kearney State College.

E.G.: How many years did that college education span?

A.R.: Well, from 24 until 37, I got my degree in 37.

E.G.: Well that's really not so long. I've heard of people who went and got nothing but summer school...at Kearney State College.

A.R.: Oh, yes, I didn't get it that way.

E.G.: Considerably longer.

A.R.: Yes. I liked it that way, I liked to take it in the summer, I always [don't understand these words] – we generally had a choice of what we wanted to take and we could get something that was helpful and also contribute – help to build up for our - our degree credits.

E.G.: One woman school teacher said that, she took longer than you did to get through because I think she never did go in the winter-time, but she said that school would be out, she would go to summer school 8 weeks, go home, make 3 dresses, and start teaching again. [chuckles] [7:42]

A.R.: It never seemed very long, that summer vacation went too fast.

E.G.: Yes. One of the questions we like to ask people in these interviews, Ms. Rebhan, is community use of the school building and something about community/teacher/children relationships. Did you have community meetings?

A.R.: I think we had many of those in my early teaching, more than they have now in the rural schools. The one – I'm not too sure, I haven't been in the rural schools really to follow up on every program. But we did have, it was really the community center, the school was at that time, and in my early days, when I still went to country school. We used to have literary societies, we had various kinds of contests, we, we – later on we, when I was teaching, I – we began – we still had the same...we didn't have literary societies anymore, it seemed like people got away from the debating and – and literary interests, a little bit more for the fun and for enjoyment then. But we did have carnivals and our programs, we only put on two big programs a school year while I was teaching at school and the – the whole community would come, they were all interested in what was going on at school. And, with those sometimes we had reading contests and various – and even domestic like – well, cooking and baking and sewing, would be brought in. Girls of a certain age would participate and, like, who could have the best button-hole, or who could bake the best cake, and that was brought in, and that was interesting. The – the parents were always interested in that to see what their children were doing, too, and presenting.

E.G.: Something like the county fair at a district school level? [9:49]

A.R.: It does seem so, yes, it was something that – that everyone was interested in, it was something that – like 4-H Club is now. We didn't have 4-H at that time.

E.G.: You think that kind of thing, however, died out. [10:05]

A.R.: Well, because the other things from the outside drawn them there...it's the same thing, like 4-H has drawn them out away from that. And, I don't know if that – it seems like people go so much farther now for their entertainment, then it was just local, everybody, if something was going on in the local school, they were there, whether they had children or not.

E.G.: I suppose those districts in which you taught had a farm or farm family on every 160 acres?

A.R.: Yes.

E.G.: Unless you were out West in Nebraska.

A.R.: That is right.

E.G.: That's no longer the case in this area?

A.R.: I find that in the area that I taught, I can go there for miles and see no building anymore.

E.G.: Yes. So I suppose that if you, if one wanted to have a community meeting around the local school house he would find neither the people nor the school house in many cases.

A.R.: That's right. The schools are gone now – these schools that I have taught in are all gone.

E.G.: How about parental support of your decisions, who made the decisions in the school? Did you get community backing pretty well? [11:07]

A.R.: Oh, indeed. I don't think – I think there was so much more trust in those days, and more honesty, I would like to say, too. Because, if you promised to do something you did abide by it. And, I know that we – when we used to have these programs, and like [can't understand word] of socials came with the programs, well, the school board would hand over – would let me take care of the money and get what I wanted for the school. They trusted you like that, and you – you lived up to the trust. And, that was

something that, well, you get things that you needed, you would like to ask the school board to buy, you know, things that you felt like were necessary to the school and yet you felt like we can do without it if we have to, you didn't like to bother the school board to buy it for you.

E.G.: Yes. In curriculum matters, Ms. Rebhan, we often hear now-a-days the back-to-the-basics movement. I wondered if you would mind discussing that in reference to the teaching of reading. [12:09]

A.R.: Yes, I have been much disturbed about the reading in our schools at the present time. I feel that, although it may be old-fashioned, yet still we did get results in the way we used to teach reading. We – we didn't assign so much to read, but what we read, the children were asked to read 3 times before they came to class, and then they read it aloud, and as teachers we generally had to be very – we tried to be very careful about their expression of reading and seeing that they did understand what they were reading, and we questioned them on that and then we were, the new words, they - we became familiar with and we learned their pronunciation and their meaning, and to try to use those in and make it a part of our vocabulary, and, although we didn't make as much progress as they do now, or read as many books, but nevertheless, I think they learned to read with expression, they learned to get the thought as they read, and they annunciated and pronounced words correctly because they had been given that opportunity to read aloud in class, which they don't have now. Just from my experience in some substitute teaching, I notice that after I had been out of teaching for quite – for some years, but I noticed in the newer method that they used, the object was to read 6 books a year for - this was for the 2nd grade. And these little children would read, and if they didn't – they had to read those on their own. Well, a child at that age is not that responsible, but he knows what he has, if he has read it correctly or if he has learned anything from it, only the story, that seems to be all they read for, and I think that has carried over to children now-a-days. I think some – we don't have novels anymore, or any reading materials that seem to deal with the beautiful expressions of description that we used to have in our earlier literature, and the children now don't care for that description at all, they only care for the story, they say "oh, go along with the story." So, I do think that we're losing an awful lot – the child is losing so much by not getting to appreciate the beautiful descriptions we have had in our literature, and we do – what we have now, but those books are not read.

E.G.: And you would talk about those books, do you mean the books of yesteryear, the New England writers, for instance. The Longfellow. Etc.? [14:58]

A.R.: Well, both, and the modern. I can't get interested in the modern books, I suppose, because I like to have a little bit more background...I don't just care for the story alone. I like to get acquainted with the characters in it, and I like to know how they meet their problems and comparing them with mine, and I think it'd take a little bit longer time to read books, get something out of it.

E.G.: Well your teaching experience has spanned several decades. [15:32]

A.R.: Yes.

E.G.: You probably noticed that the so-called classics are not taught now to the extent that they used to be.

A.R.: I've noticed that, and instead they have those comics, you know, put out with the classics in them and well – when I was teaching, in my last years that I was teaching, I think it was Silas Marner, well they

– the children found this classic down in the drugstore, you know, one of the comics, and so they would read that, they said they'd much rather read that than read the book. And, you know, Silas Marner does have beautiful descriptions and characterizations of people.

E.G.: Which proves your point that you were making, that they want to the story.

A.R.: Yes. [chuckles] That's it.

E.G.: Rather than the – the other fine uses of the language.

A.R.: True.

E.G.: A dean of the College of Education, or rather the school of education at Kearney State was telling me the other day that he found that one thing the rural schools did that is no longer done was, and you just mentioned, the habit of having the students read aloud in class. [16:26]

A.R.: That way you know if they are pronouncing them rightly. How else would you know?

E.G.: Yes. There's a certain slip-shoddiness about pronunciation now-a-days.

A.R.: Yes.

E.G.: That I don't think used to exist. And, it could well be because we hate to correct a student in his normal discourse, but then we have him read and we feel that that is the place to correct him, I suppose. [chuckles]

A.R.: That is true. Mm-hmm.

E.G.: Well, how about penmanship? Did you teach the so-called Palmer method? [17:11]

A.R.: I tried it, and I – I took the course in summer school, too. And I did improve my penmanship very much and always felt like that was very necessary, but we – it seems like in our curriculum when you have all grades and you have so little time, about 10 or 15 minutes for penmanship. Well, when I took it, we had to practice 4 hours a day, and, you know, those 10 or 15 minutes, you don't accomplish much in the country school, and that is where I was teaching at.

E.G.: You did the – you did the ovals, right, in the Palmer method?

A.R.: Yes.

E.G.: And the push-pull exercises?

A.R.: Push-pull, yes. Yes. And I do think that that did very – help me very much. When I was going – because I, my penmanship was very poor before I took it. I took it my early years at college.

E.G.: You remember about the position of the body? [18:12]

A.R.: Yes.

E.G.: What were those positions?

A.R.: [chuckles] Well, your feet had to be flat on the floor, and your elbow had to be at the corner of the desk, and the holding of the pen was – I have, I guess I'm dull on that now, too, but I don't know that I

practiced it, but it helped me and my writing, I don't know that I had the push, the action in my, in my arm that I should have according to the Palmer method. But I do think many people took that and they wrote beautifully, so it really had its merits.

E.G.: I suppose that part of that general feeling that you paid attention to the language, one way or the other, to the annunciation, which you mentioned, and to the penmanship, you took care of what you did.

A.R.: We cared, we did care.

E.G.: I wanted to ask you about history. How did your students look at history, how did you look at it as you taught it? [19:11]

A.R.: Well, history was never my favorite subject. It was dry and it was something, I think in my early – when I learned history in school, we had barns, seems to me it was a barns strict – anyway, it was an older book, and it just had little paragraphs and it was this battle and that battle and it was battles, battles all the time. And I never knew why they had the battles, we never had any justification for that, and I always thought that was so dry, I didn't care about those battles, they didn't mean a thing to me, and yet we had to memorize some dates for battles, you know, and for wars and so on. That – history just seemed to be nothing but battles and wars. But, to me at that time – so when I taught it, we had better, the textbooks were a little bit bet – improved, giving the causes of war and the results of the war and few of the battles, and those that were important in it, but it seems to me that was getting better, and I – I tried to, we used maps with it, and I think that all helped. Earlier, we never had – when I went to school, we didn't have those wall maps.

E.G.: Did you notice any change – normally, the histories that I studied as a youngster did carry us from war to war to war, each war a chapter, of course. Did you notice any – any intrusions, say of economic, intellectual affairs into the history? [20:38]

A.R.: Not then.

E.G.: Not then?

A.R.: No. I don't remember that – that's what I think was so much better in the books now that I have. I haven't taught history, I was generally in the field of English since I've been in Jr. High and Sr. High work.

E.G.: You know, you mentioned English and I'll have to say that we were talking before this interview was recorded, and you mentioned that you had attended classes under Calvin T. Ryan...

A.R.: Yes.

E.G.: At Kearney State, and it seems to me it would be nice if we – if we gave him a little time here. Do you mind saying anything about Calvin T. Ryan? C.T., as he was called, I guess. [21:27]

A.R.: Yes. Well, I – I liked him as a person very much, but I was a little fearful of him in class. I – I – I've always been one that was awfully self-conscious, and if someone points out my mistake it – it bothers me a great deal. And, of course that was one of his good points in teaching, he would not mention your name, but he would look at you when he read that from your paper [chuckles] and so I never did – did forget some of the corrections that I did receive. Right now I can't think of any, but there was one

missed word I miss-spelled, and he was great on spelling, too, he was exacting, and that's what we want. We want to have – when we're there to learn we want to correct our short-comings.

E.G.: You mentioned – let's see here – I've heard that there's still a few states around or colleges around that offer course in rural school education. I don't think there are any offered in the state of Nebraska in Rural School Education. Certainly, there haven't been any courses offered in the 23 years that I remember Kearney State. You did go to Kearney State and do you remember any courses in Rural School Education? [22:34]

A.R.: Yes I do. I took them under Mr. and Mrs. Powell, mainly under Mr. Powell, I don't just recall his first name now. But he was a – he was a wonderful instructor...I – I – I got my – I received my degree in 60s – in 37. I'm forgetting. But, it was previous to that, you see I started my education in 24, 1924 at Kearney, and I continued in summer courses, and usually I had 2 summer course under Mr. Powell. Because I was teaching in rural schools at that time, and I felt that that was the - what I should have. And, I – he was a man of great inspiration. He gave you – he inspired the work, and he had affiliated schools around Kearney and – would – had teachers go out there and teach and come back and they would give their experiences and we all got an a- I had experience in that, too, going out to teach one time in one of those rural schools for a week and I think that his work with – he was certainly dedicated to the rural school, and he would come out to – he came out to our school – that he run, he and she, she was a great singer, he was too, and they could sing, they could really put on a entertainment for the evening, but it was mainly on the educational line along encouraging the education of the school and people's interest in it. And, I thought he wanted the parents to work with the school, which he accomplished that way. [24:52]

E.G.: Ms. Rebhan, in those years in which you were teaching rural schools, how did you look upon yourself? If you did stand back and look at yourself, or at least in retrospect, how do you look upon yourself?

A.R.: Well, as a rural teacher, I felt that I was important in the district because a great responsibility had been placed in me, the people had trusted me, and I felt that I wanted to set a good example both as a person and in the work that I was putting out and the instruction that I was giving. So, teaching has always been something that very important to me. Whenever I meet other teachers, too, I feel that they are some of the finest citizens we have because of the contribution they can give to our citizenship.

E.G.: How about the rural school itself. It is probably on its way out and has been for some time. There seem to be movements about every few years to do something to consolidate class 1 schools with class 6 or whatever. Did you feel that it was a good thing that we had rural schools? [cuckoo clock chimes in the background]

A.R.: I do, and I do yet. I believe that the rural schools, we have children there, they are living with their parents, they're getting – they're not on the bus all day, you might say, like some of them are being bussed at long distances now to school. And we were able to get good teachers in, I don't see why we can't now anymore. They may be some married teachers that are living in the area that are – that's about the teachers they get because the teachers are leaving now to go out to teach, they don't like to go to the rural schools. But, to me, I think that that is where we have had our fundamental learning and citizenship is built there. Is right in the rural area. Those people live close to the soil, and they're close to God, and they are generally honest and upright in helping each other and I can't think of a better place

to live than in a rural community, and to teach there. And I think that that's what we need is rural control of schools and as long as they are getting – the teachers get a lot more individual help in the rural schools. And, a – a personal interest in them. I think there's much more – the teacher's more in a part of their family than the other school's they're just - see the child in the classroom and that's about it. [26:19]

E.G.: It was a pretty rough existence, comparatively speaking, teaching in a rural school, wasn't it? Do you look back upon the days of building fires and so-on with any regret?

A.R.: No, I don't. I thought maybe then that that was kind of drudge – a form of drudgery, but when I look back on it now, I think, well, those were happy days. You know, you – you disciplined yourself, and you had time for this and time for that. And we didn't think of coffee – coffee time or anything like that, we were just at our work and we didn't think of eating until we got home at night and had a cold lunch at noon. And I don't feel that I suffered from that at all, I feel like it helps build character.

E.G.: Well I think our tape is about up to its allotted time, Ms. Rebhan. I certainly enjoyed visiting with you. Thank you very much for cooperating.

A.R.: Well, I thank you, too, for your patience. I, perhaps, didn't answer as I should in many places or else that I could tell you more but then I know that our time is limited.

E.G.: Thank you. [28:53]

A.R.: Mmm, Thank you, mmmm.

End. [28:59]